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His power has limits

But look out for subtle skills

CORD MEYER

To outward appearances, Mikhail S. Gorbachev, the newly selected general secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, seems to enjoy vast and untrammelled authority in comparison with the popularly elected leaders in the West.

He is immune from criticism by any opposition political party and assured of 99 percent support when the Russian people are allowed to vote. There is no free press to expose his mistakes and no courts capable of overturning his decisions. But behind the curtain of complete secrecy with which the Soviet Politburo shrouds its debates, there are limits on Mr. Gorbachev's exercise of power.

Unlike the newly elected American president who can choose his own Cabinet, the general secretary must live with the Politburo members who selected him until they either die or can be persuaded to step down. It took Nikita Khrushchev and Leonid Brezhnev four years or more to move from being first among equals to positions of pre-eminence.

In Mr. Gorbachev's case, veteran Kremlin watchers disagree as to how long it will take him to build a solid majority that he can count on in the Politburo. Since Mr. Gorbachev was put in control of party personnel by Yuri Andropov, he presumably has had a head start in arranging to move his supporters into position, and the next plenary meeting of the Central Committee should show the extent to which he can fill the vacancies in the Politburo with his own people.

A second and more serious limitation on the new general secretary's freedom of action is inherent in his role as member and representative of the new class of party apparatchiks and privileged bureaucrats that run Russia. He has been selected by this *nomenklatura*, as the elite is called, not only to rule the Soviet Union but to defend their interests.

As Yuri Andropov briefly demonstrated, with Mr. Gorbachev's support, it is possible to criticize and even to punish the most extreme cases of official corruption, but the whole range of special privileges associated with high rank in Russia is sacrosanct. An attempt by the general secretary to curb these rewards is likely to engender the reaction Mr. Khrushchev encountered when he

tried to shake up the bureaucracy. A majority of the Politburo met secretly and removed him from office.

It will be interesting to watch just how far Mr. Gorbachev dares to go in challenging the existing order in his promise to improve productivity and make the system work better.

Any real decentralization of economic decision-making or any significant grant of autonomy to peasant farmers threatens the monopoly on power of the Communist Party itself. Therefore, for all his bold rhetoric, Mr. Gorbachev is likely to settle for tinkering with the economy rather than risking the fundamental changes that are so necessary.

Within these limits on his authority, however, the new general secretary has wide scope to maneuver, particularly in the field of foreign policy. Top U.S. intelligence officials have taken a close look at his record and do not share Margaret Thatcher's optimism about his intentions on the world stage. They point out that his first powerful patron was Mikhail Suslov, who got him named to the party Secretariat in 1978 in a deal with Mr. Brezhnev.

His second influential patron was Yuri Andropov, who gave him authority over party cadres. In view of this backing from the most doctrinaire ideologue in the Soviet Union and from the former boss of the KGB, it is reasonable to assume that Mr. Gorbachev will prove a tough and determined proponent of the Communist cause in his international dealings.

There is, moreover, a significant difference between him and all previous Russian leaders. He is the first of the new generation of urbane, educated, and sophisticated apparatchiks to make it to the top. His trip to London last December demonstrated the diplomatic value of his superior tact and intelligent sophistication. It was more than a public-relations triumph and marked the emergence on the world scene of a new and more formidable type of Soviet leadership.

President Reagan's Kremlin watchers do not underestimate the subtlety and skill with which Mr. Gorbachev will try to exploit and widen the splits within the NATO alliance.

As one senior Pentagon official remarked, "We really got to like old Chernenko and wished he would stay. It was a quiet period for us. Now there will be a transition to a much harsher world with far more initiatives."

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.